

EAST MIDLANDS EARLY YEARS SYSTEM LEADERS FORUM (HUB CLUB) BUILDING A CONNECTED EARLY YEARS SYSTEM

STRENGTHENING SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP TO
DELIVER THE BEST START IN LIFE

The Challenge

The early years landscape is increasingly complex. Local Authorities, Multi Academy Trusts, Family Hubs, Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs, Maths Hubs, English Hubs, Teaching School Hubs, RISE, schools and private, voluntary and independent providers all play a vital role in improving outcomes for babies, young children and families. However, opportunities for these organisations to come together strategically have historically been limited.

Recognising this gap, the East Midlands Early Years Stronger Practice Hub and the Derbyshire & Nottinghamshire Early Years Stronger Practice Hub, working alongside Local Authorities across the region, established the East Midlands Early Years System Leaders Forum – Hub Club. The ambition was simple: create a trusted space where system leaders could build relationships, understand one another's roles, align priorities and work collectively to deliver the Government's Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life strategy.



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The Innovation

Hub Club is intentionally different from a traditional networking event. Each termly forum combines national policy updates with structured opportunities for collaborative discussion and action planning. Rather than focusing on individual organisational priorities, the forum encourages participants to think as a connected regional system.

Partners include representatives from the Department for Education, Local Authorities, Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs, Family Hubs, English Hubs, Maths Hubs, Teaching School Hubs and Multi Academy Trusts.

The first meeting established a shared understanding of the early years system, common language and key challenges. The second built on these foundations by exploring the implications of Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life and helping organisations better understand each other's responsibilities, offers and opportunities for collaboration.



The Impact

Although Hub Club is still in its first year, it is already demonstrating measurable system benefits. Participants report stronger relationships between organisations, improved understanding of each partner's contribution, better signposting between programmes, more coordinated professional development and increased collaboration around school readiness, Reception improvement and workforce development.

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One participant reflected:

“The strongest theme emerging from the forum is increased collaboration across Early Years organisations, resulting in more joined-up professional development, workforce development and support for children, families and practitioners.”

Following the June forum, Simon Renshaw, Director of the Leicester and Leicestershire Teaching School Hub, wrote:

“A huge thank you for bringing everyone together. The day really demonstrated the value of collective leadership across the region and the opportunity we have to work together to improve outcomes for children and families.”



Key learning for the system

One of the most significant lessons has been that successful collaboration requires neutral coordination. Hub Club has been made possible through investment from the Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs, whose funding has supported planning, facilitation and administration.

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As the partnership has matured, it has become increasingly apparent that relying on any single organisation to fund and coordinate the forum can unintentionally create perceptions of hierarchy or ownership. The strength of Hub Club lies precisely in the fact that every partner participates as an equal.

This case study therefore highlights the value of modest central investment in system coordination. A small coordination fund, potentially supported by the Department for Education, could sustain the logistics and facilitation of the forum while preserving the neutrality, trust and shared ownership that underpin effective systems leadership. Such investment would represent a relatively small cost but could unlock significant collaboration, reduce duplication and maximise the impact of existing public investment across the early years system.

Looking ahead

Two successful forum gatherings have established strong foundations for a regional community of system leaders. The next Hub Club, planned for October 2026, will move beyond relationship-building towards collaborative action, with partners sharing progress, identifying joint priorities and developing coordinated approaches to improving outcomes for babies, young children and families.

As national reforms continue to evolve, Hub Club offers a practical model of how organisations can work together across traditional boundaries. It demonstrates that when relationships, trust and shared purpose are intentionally nurtured, the collective impact of the early years system becomes far greater than the contribution of any single organisation.



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